

## Death and the Afterlife

### I. A Long Life

#### A. The Land

1. From an Israelite's perspective, Yahweh's blessing was manifested in a natural death at the end of a long and satisfying life in the land of promise (Gen. 35:29; Ex. 20:12; Jud. 8:32; Ps. 21:4; 91:16). In contrast, a premature death or death in exile represented His punishment (Ps. 102:23; Is. 65:20; Deut. 28:58-68). Though Israel would always retain the promise of the land because of Yahweh's one-sided covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:8), God gave them an opportunity to choose between life and death, blessing and cursing on the basis of the Mosaic covenant.
2. This is stated clearly in Deuteronomy 30:15-20. This passage, which has been called the clearest expression of the Israelite view of life, demonstrates that life in the land is contingent upon Israel's faithfulness to Yahweh's commands; Israel would enjoy a prosperous physical life through obedience, but death and exile would result from disobedience. (See Robert A. Pyne. *Soteriology*, p. 30.)
3. Being buried in the Promised Land was important to the righteous Jew, for they were physically connected to the promise Yahweh made to Abraham. Other theological implications here are not known.

#### B. The Expected End

1. In Genesis 46:30, Jacob said that he was ready to die after seeing Joseph alive. He was satisfied, and he regarded his life as complete. However, when he believed Joseph to be dead, he anticipated that his own death would be a bitter one as a result (Gen. 37:35).
2. Similarly, Numbers 16 records several examples of premature death, which came through the judgment of Yahweh. In verses 29 and 30, Moses indicates that this was the only kind of death that would be interpreted as the judgment of God?
3. The thought of a premature death was abhorrent to the righteous Israelite, who feared being cut off from his people and from the worship of His God (Ps. 88). (See Robert A. Pyne. *Soteriology*, p. 30.)

### II. Death

#### A. Death as Natural

1. According the Genesis 3, death was seen as a natural end to life due to the consequences of the fall. When life has been long, happy and fulfilled, then death is a natural and expected end. Thus, immortality after the fall was seen as a small potential rather than an actual reality.
2. "Death...was not an irrational intruding enemy but part of an ordered, controlled harmonious creation. Biological life and death are not separate phenomena, as if the latter intruded to thwart the Creator's design. They are bound together as part of a singular divine will for His creatures." (L. R. Bailey. *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, p. 58.)
3. However, death was seen as bad and intrusive when premature or violent or when there was no surviving heir.

## **B. Descriptions of Death**

1. The early scriptures do not say much about where one goes after death and what kind of existence they have. This suggests that for many Jews this was not as much a concern as was their current life. These concepts are developed later, during and after the exile.
2. Several texts portray death as rest, inactivity, welcome relief, and sleep (Job 3:13, 17, 21-22; 14:12; Ps. 13:3; Jer. 51:39, 57).
3. More commonly, however, death is seen as a bitter enemy of life as one who hunts and traps its victims (Ps. 18:4; 49:14; 55:4; Prov. 30:15; Eccl. 7:26; Hab. 2:5).
4. Ezekiel pictures the dead as lying inactive in groups in a vast underground cavern (32:22-30). There is no sense of meaningful interaction among the dead. The Old Testament phrase “gathered to his peoples” (Gen. 25:8; 25:17; 35:29; 49:33) carries the idea of the physical burying of the person with their relatives rather than a reunion in the afterlife.

## **C. The Underworld**

1. The term *Sheol* always refers to the realm of the dead, which is located within the depths of the earth. Sheol is unlike other terms that can mean “pit” or “underworld.”
2. Although there are times that Sheol can refer to the grave, it is most often used of the realm of the dead – below the physical grave in the ground (Deut. 32:22; Amos 9:2).
3. Because Sheol is often associated with the wicked, the term was often and incorrectly translated as “hell” in the KJV. However, the Hebrew Bible never indicates any form of punishment after death.

## **D. Description and Inhabitants**

1. Sheol is the opposite theological extreme to Yahweh, and the dominant characteristic of its inhabitants is their separation from Him. The scriptures describe it as a place where its inhabitants cannot remember, praise, or thank Yahweh (Ps. 6:6; Isa. 38:18; Jonah 2:5). It is the land of forgetfulness (Ps. 88:22) where they are cut off and forgotten by Yahweh (Ps. 88:5). Thus, it is a place that the righteous dread (Ps. 16:10; 30:3; 49:15; 86:13). (See Philip S. Johnston. *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*, p. 75.)
2. At the same time, Sheol is described as a place known by and accessible to Yahweh. It cannot escape from Him (Ps. 139:8; Amos 9:2) and does not negate His power (Isa. 7:11; Job 11:8).
3. Sheol is a place of no return (Job 16:22), of captivity and gates (Isa. 38:10) and bars (Jonah 2:6). It is a place of darkness (Job 10:21; Ps. 88:6, 12), inactivity and silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17).
4. There are two kinds of people that are associated with Sheol. First, those who are destined for Sheol are the ungodly, the wicked (Isa. 5:14; Ps. 9:17; 31:17; 141:7; Job 21:13), the sinners (Job 24:19), the scoffers (Isa. 28:15, 18), and the immoral (Prov. 5:5; 7:27; 9:18). The second group includes righteous men like Jacob, Hezekiah, Job, and the Psalmist. However, they speak of going there during times of trial, whether loss, illness, affliction, or abandonment. They speak of Sheol because they fear that

they are not right with God. Later, after the time of trial, they no longer speak of Sheol, which they interpret as divine punishment. Generally, it is seen as the destination of the wicked, and the righteous acknowledge rescue from it.

### **III. The Afterlife**

#### **A. The Nature**

1. All people both righteous and wicked are seen as dying and passing into some kind of afterlife. The only two exceptions are Enoch and Elijah. Yet nothing is mentioned regarding why they were exempted or where they went, and it receives no theological reflection. Likewise they are seen as the exception in the Bible, not the norm.
2. Overall there is very little discussion of where the righteous go in the afterlife and what kind of experience they have. Psalms 16, 49, and 73 indicate that Yahweh will ransom the righteous from Sheol and “take” or “receive” them. This is something that only Yahweh is capable of doing.
3. However, these Psalms give no indication of how, when, or where this ransom will take place for the righteous. For most Israelites their hope was fixed in the present life. But a few seem to glimpse a continued life with Yahweh beyond the present life.
4. Nevertheless, the righteous are sometimes portrayed as inactive after death. Like Ezekiel 32, 1 Samuel 28 portrays Samuel as sleeping and inactive in the afterlife and is angered by Saul’s disturbance when he awakens him. This seems to imply that even the righteous seem to be in some kind of slumber, awaiting something else.

#### **B. Resurrection**

1. There are a few passages in the Old Testament that speak of or indicate a final resurrection after death. Deuteronomy 32 and 1 Samuel 2 speak of Yahweh’s ability to “make alive.” There is no event or reason connected to this statement; they simply affirm His power to do so.
2. This is not spoken of from personal Israelite experience but of the potential for Yahweh greatness to “make alive.”
3. This indicates that the Israelites had a concept and a hope of a time when Yahweh would “make alive” certain peoples.
4. A few prophetic texts portray a day when death will be destroyed, thus an idea of resurrection and eternal life is implied (Hos. 13:14; Isa. 25:7).
5. Later Isaiah 26 and Daniel 12 go further and speak of a day when Yahweh’s people will be raised from the dead to dwell with Him. Daniel also states that both the righteous and the wicked will be resurrected in order to be judged.

#### **C. The Intertestamental Period**

1. By the intertestamental period the Jews began to develop further the ideas of an afterlife with Yahweh and resurrection as presented in Isaiah and Daniel. This is seen in the writings of the apocrypha (2 Macc. 7:9, 11, 14, 23, 29; 1 Enoch 22:13; 90:33).
2. Likewise by the time of Jesus the Pharisees and many other Jews have a well-developed theology of the resurrection (Acts 23:8). However, this was not held by all, for the Sadducees denied the resurrection because it was not mentioned in the Torah, which was alone authoritative for them (Mark 12:8; Acts 23:8).

### **Bibliography**

Johnston, Philip S. *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Pyne, Robert A. *Soteriology*. Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001: 29-40.